Mount Rainier National Park

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

The Story of Paradise Inn

"Uncle Sam . . . has provided lodging and food in the most distant and inaccessible places so that you might enjoy yourself and realize as little as possible the rigors of the pioneer traveler's life."

—1920s *Travel & Tourism* brochure

Paradise Inn has witnessed a lifetime's worth of changes—inside as well as outside its walls. Step back in time and imagine Paradise Inn bustling with tourists in long skirts and woolen traveling suits. Visitors from all over the United States have come to "See America First" in style. Tonight, after dinner in the Silver Forest dining room, a dance will be held in the lobby. In the morning, some may take up a game of golf on the new nine-hole course, while others will wander off-trail over the meadow, marveling at the view.

From Another Age

Paradise Inn opened for business in 1917, replacing a series of rugged tent camps. Under the watchful eye of the National Park Service's first director, Steven Mather, the Inn was to be a model for other parks. Mather sought to promote tourism and development within the national parks, and he challenged local business leaders to cooperate in the creation of the Inn. Those local leaders formed a new concession, the Rainier National Park Company. They built Paradise Inn in just under a year and with a little more than $90,000.

As you walk through the Inn, notice the massive network of Alaskan yellow cedar beams above your head. Architects from the Tacoma firm of Heath, Grove, and Bell used timber from the park in their design. They salvaged cedar trees just below Narada Falls from Silver Forest, which was damaged by fire in 1885. The wood for the historic tables and chairs seen throughout the Inn also came from Silver Forest. Carpenter Hanz Fraehnke used the same salvaged cedar to hand-hew the clock and the piano.

Why would the National Park Service cut down trees for the sake of a tourist hotel? It's hard to imagine such a thing happening in our time. Today, we understand how vital standing dead trees are to the environment as potential habitat for forest animals. Now most Americans see their national parks as special, almost sacred places where timber harvesting is out of place. In a way, the very beams of the Paradise Inn tell us the story of another time: the Inn is a window into our changing vision of what wilderness is supposed to be.

Weathering Change

Visitors from all over the country flocked to Paradise Inn in the 1920s. Its original designers thought that guests would want to sleep in bungalow-style tent cabins. But tourists in Paradise prefered the luxury of guest rooms. An annex with 100 guest rooms was completed by 1922. A balcony, porch, and a new kitchen wing soon increased the Inn's charm.

But many winters of drifting snow brought less cosmetic renovations, too. The Inn began to slowly slide downhill, so its massive cedar beams, initially fit together without nails, had to be braced. The Inn remained popular through the Great Depression—and even hosted the 1934 Olympic tryouts—but the expense of constant maintainance began to take its toll.

Enter the Automobile

A visitor to Paradise in 1920 would be stunned to see the number of cars in the Inn's parking lot today. An automobile was indeed a luxury then. Yet the rise of the automobile nearly brought about the Inn's demise. As cars and roads gradually improved, people could visit Mount Rainier without staying overnight. That meant fewer guests staying at the Inn. By 1950, the Inn's owners realized they could no longer make a profit.

Ironically, as business at the Inn declined, visitation to the Paradise area increased. Over half a million visitors came to the park in 1950. Their footsteps began to show.

From Paradise Inn's windows, guests saw the fragile vegetation of the meadows becoming trampled and scarred. The Inn offered a front row seat to profound changes in the way people experienced the wilderness.

Preserving History and Scenic Beauty

In order to keep Paradise Inn open, the Federal Government purchased it in 1952, leasing its operation back to the concessionaire. But increased expenses and ongoing maintenance culminated in a recommendation that the Inn be torn down. The Park Service had begun to shift its attention away from promoting parks and towards protecting them. The damaged meadow became the focus of numerous studies and a massive revegetation effort which continues today.

However, many Washingtonians felt a similar desire to save Paradise Inn. They argued that if the Park Service was fighting to protect the natural beauty of Paradise, it should also fight to protect its history. Though other historic park buildings were replaced at Paradise during the 1960s, public pressure and several million dollars of renovations saved Paradise Inn. Today it is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is an important part of the park's National Historic Landmark District.

From Paradise Inn's massive cedar beams to the meadows around it, we find clues which illuminate our ever-changing relationship with wilderness.